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Title:

Address to the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association

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Address by the Premier of South Australia
Don Dunstan, to The Australasian Univer-
sities Language and Literature Association.

26.8.74

Professor Coghlan, Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Might I commence my remarks this evening
by welcoming those of you who are visitors
to this City and State. May your stay
here be an enjoyable one.

Until about a decade ago, Adelaide had
what was, in truth, a somewhat unjustified
reputation for a high degree of middle
class rectitude and sobriety.

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It was alleged that we were a centre
renowned for the earnest cultivation of
yeomanary virtues. Fierce Westlyans
roamed unfettered. Wallowing in their
flesh-pots, people in Sydney and Melbourne
sneered.

Well, we are now, I trust, still honest,
but not boring about it; still sober,
generally in working hours; and still
virtuous in all matters needful of that
quality. In addition we have discovered
that we also enjoy life and that the
cultivation of the arts of conviviality
is a delightful perquisite of the

cultivation of the arts generally. In those same ten years the performing arts have flourished in this city. May languages and literature and your congress do similarly.

I must confess that while I accepted with alacrity Brian Coghlan's invitation to speak at tonight's dinner, when it came time actually to consider what best to say I was somewhat at a loss. An obvious subject was points of style in political rhetoric, except that high rhetoric is out of style in itself.

A modern budget speech may bring tears to the eyes of parliamentarians, but not for the nobility of its sentiments or the splendour of its language.

I suppose high rhetoric fell into its first decline towards the end of the last century when the Imperial parliament found itself considering an increasing number of bills concerned with such mundane but essential matters as water supply and sewerage and re-activated sludge. There are, to my knowledge, no great speeches on deep drainage.

(Which brings to mind a story concerning the troubles the Imperial parliament had to deal with a century ago when considering such measures. It was then its practice to pass detailed bills enabling local governments to install their water works. The bills were usually accompanied by very complex schedules detailing the size of water cocks and the diameters of mains and pipes. Such schedules were prepared by the Town Clerks of the boroughs involved.

One bill concerning waterworks for a large midlands borough was presented to parliament with an immense schedule carefully inscribed in faultless copper-plate. Several hand-written copies of the Bill proper were circulated, but there was only one copy of the schedule. The measure passed both houses.

It was only then that it was discovered that the town clerk of the borough involved had inserted in one long section of the schedule involving stop-cocks the phrase. "And the Town Clerk's marriage is

hereby dissolved".

An immense legal problem was thus created. Which town clerk was meant? Did it apply to all Town Clerks of that borough for evermore? Would the Town Clerk be re-married by the amending bill which had immediately to be prepared? Such is not the stuff of high rhetoric.)

Passing from this area, then, I toyed with the idea of touching on the language of the Australian Press, especially in relation to its political commentary. But I have reconsidered this. After all,

why should I say when they go wrong? Or how they could be more effective?

Besides, even a gentle treatment would probably be more grist to the sub-editors mill - something like. "Dunstan: (Colon) Shock Press Attack, Demands Probe".

Which reminds me of the competition, organised some years ago by journalists working on the London 'Times', for the most boring headline. The winning entry read "Small Earthquake in Peru: Not Many Dead".

I will not speak further of the press.

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So finally, I decided that perhaps the most appropriate topic for me to touch on this evening would be Government support for the arts, and for writers and writing, in this country. I will now do so, lightly and generally.

To many Australians, it is strange, even ironic in a sense, that at a time when this country, along with most western countries, faces quite staggering economic problems, Government support for the arts should be so high. I do not know how much in total was spent last financial year in Australia on Government arts grants, but

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I do know that the Australian Council for the Arts disbursed over \$15 million, while my Government's total payments (which of course include ongoing capital works such as our Festival Centre) were close to \$6 million.

The real total would have to include expenditures by other State Governments, and including additional specialist support by various Government educational organisations and agencies.

There has never in the history of this country been a similar period. It is the country's first experience of cultural largesse. It will be possible to look back at this period and see it as quite unique. The nation's cities during this time have all acquired, or are in the process of acquiring, important venues for the performing arts. Art Galleries are flourishing. The art market is a miniature bourse (which should perhaps be the subject of a more critical paper). Theatre, dance and opera companies burgeon. Australian plays are played; writers have never had it so good.

It is a period of immense artistic and creative activity.

But whether it is a period which produces works of great and enduring value remains to be seen by eyes other than ours.

It may not do so. They may have value only now, and only for some of us. Still, I think it can be said that in the histories of world cultures, periods of high patronage are most often also periods of artistic achievement.

Which brings me to the matter of Government support for writers.

The Australian Council for the Arts' Literature Board dominates this area. Last year its budget was, I understand, some \$1.5 million. This year the figure could be increased by as much as a third. I understand that very few writers or aspirants have missed out receiving a grant. In fact, as one official of the Australian Council remarked at the last Adelaide Festival Writers' Week, the only people in Australia complaining about the situation now are publishers who feel they have lost their financial control over authors, academics who cannot apply, and

those few writers or aspirants who have not so far been successful with their applications for assistance.

I think, then, that there is cause for some self-congratulation in this matter. It is a mature society which is prepared both to support its artists and writers and to eschew social or political controls, covert or otherwise. This is, of course, the danger whenever Governments become involved in the patronage of artists and writers, but a danger that has been faced and dealt with before by the artists themselves. I cannot see any artists'

freedom being lost in Australia at present through too heavy a dependance on Government cultural largesse.

In fact, economic crises notwithstanding, Government involvement in the arts generally will continue, because it is now seen as an important (but not an unusual or radical) part of Government activity. If it is proper for Governments to fund art galleries and public libraries, so it is proper for them to do similarly with theatres and the performing arts, with books and the writers of them.

That is, of course, grossly to oversimplify what is a very delicate task, and one which cannot I believe by its very nature, be done perfectly. A committee is not a Lorenzo; Australia is a nation, whereas Florence was a small city-state. One effect of this, I think, is to cause the Literature Board's net to be spread very wide. And this in turn had created a problem for States like South Australia which wish to maintain, as far as is possible, their own cultural identity, or their ability to act autonomously if it seems desirable to them to do so.

With considerations like these in mind, this year we established an Arts Grants Advisory Committee which has the task of reporting to me and recommending on the disbursement of funds not only for the performing arts, but also for writers, musicians and painters. In respect of the latter three categories; the committee has had constantly to bear in mind the relative munificence of the Australian Council's Boards. I think it has now begun to determine a proper State role in these areas.

And in relation to literature, we do not intend to leave the field of direct grants to writers should a proper case be made out for a grant. Although for the time being no such grants will be made. However, special grants for works of regional interest, biography, history are presently considered appropriate, as also are special scholarships, lectureships, residencies and so on.

Accordingly, the first recommendation of the Committee has been made and it has been accepted. The Government intends to establish a Biennial Prize of

\$3,000 for a history or biography relating to places or people in South Australia, the winner of which will be announced during Writers' Week each Adelaide Festival of Arts. The prize may be won by either an unpublished manuscript or a book published during the relevant two year period.

That is the beginning of what I hope eventually (economic crises and the Federal Government's parsimony to the State, notwithstanding) will be a solid programme of support for writers and writing by the South Australian Government.

We have a modest but interesting tradition of literary enterprise in this State. It ranges from Banjo Patterson through to the Jindyworabaks, the "Angry Penguins", and Ern Malley, and on to Geoffrey Dutton, Max Harris and John Bray. Max Harris one of the editors of "Angry Penguins", is also a poet of some achievement, even though of late he seems to have given over poetry in favor of journalism and book retailing.

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But he is still one of our most widely known writers, and so therefore I think it is appropriate if I conclude with an anecdote concerning him during the days "Angry Penguins" was worrying the country's literary conservatives.

It concerns the late Professor Charles Jury and a lawyer, John Bray, who is now our Chief Justice. They were visited by the young Max Harris who at the age of about 22 had just discovered a French poet by the name of Ducasse. He spent some time enthusiastically extolling Ducasse's virtues and then left.

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Jury, turning to Bray, remarked.
"There once was a poet Ducasse
Who was really a bit of an arse."

To which, it is alleged Bray replied.

"He inspired young Max Harris
to vex and embarrass.

And Jury finished:

"The bourgeois, considered en-masse.

Regionalism in literature can be both amusing and rewarding. I trust, that your congress will be so too.

Thank you.

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